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ARGENTINA: Lopez Rega set back in confrontation with military 17

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ARGENTINA

Social Welfare Minister Jose Lopez Rega appears to have suffered a setback in his confrontation with the army.

The confrontation occurred when the newly appointed army commander, Maj. Gen. Alberto Numa Laplane, a supposed protege of Lopez Rega, refused an order from the minister of defense earlier this week to retire two highly respected brigadier generals who are anathema to the social welfare minister. Laplane threatened to submit his resignation to the President over the issue. The crisis was averted by a compromise allowing the two generals to remain on active duty, but not in the position Laplane originally desired.

Laplane has clearly demonstrated that his basic loyalties rest with the military and not with the Peronist political movement—a position which has increased his standing with the officer corps, which feared he would be a tool of Lopez Rega.

Recent power plays by Lopez Rega have substantially altered the political outlook in Argentina. The military, which had adopted an uncharacteristically apolitical stance after relinquishing power in 1973, now appears willing to consider reassuming its self-appointed role as political arbiter. Army leaders have come to this point only because of the inability of civilian political and labor leaders to contain Lopez Rega, whose blatantly political firing of Lt. Gen. Leandro Anaya as army commander last week and the appointment of Laplane caused deep resentment within the army. Although Laplane certainly got his position through his ties with the social welfare minister, his actions indicate that Lopez Rega may have made a serious miscalculation in his appointment.

One important question is how adroitly Lopez Rega adjusts to the fact that his protege is not a puppet. In his various confrontations in the past, the presidential adviser has shown an ability not only to survive but also to increase his political strength. In the changed political climate of the present, however, the army appears more willing to see Mrs. Peron go, if this is the price that must be paid to rid the country of Lopez Rega.

The government's backing down in its confrontation with the army has lessened the likelihood of a coup for now. Any further interference in army internal affairs, however, will refuel coup plotting. 3.5(c)

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